

TOOLKIT: LIFE INTERVIEW TIPS
<http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/lifeinttips.html>

“The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.”
Muriel Rukeyser

Why are life stories important? Talking about our lives is how we learn more about ourselves, others, the world, and life.

We live our lives forward, but we understand them backward. When you see a great movie or read a good book, you often want to see or read it again. Older people also want to "read over" or "see" parts of their lives again. In looking back, we can identify turning points or dynamic events. We can clarify and organize our thinking about life, make sense of events, and enrich the meaning of our life story. If we make meaning as young adults by fashioning dreams, as older adults we make it by shaping memories. We see how the story of our life has turned out -- then change what we can for the future and accept the rest. This process of looking back is formally called "life review." It is essential to human rights for older adults, and their experiences and expertise, be valued and appreciated by our community. The only way to prevent discrimination based on age is for all of us to respect value and appreciate the ongoing contributions of older adults.

Informal (simply reminiscing) or formal (an interview) life review offers a number of benefits for both young and old:

- It creates a sense of continuity, linking the past with the present and the future.
- It enables younger people to find out interesting things about their family members or members of their community, as well as the broader historical past.
- It's a way to pass on family stories and traditions, and preserve family history and cultural heritage.
- It builds self-esteem in those doing the telling and those doing the listening.
- It helps young people develop research, interviewing, and listening skills.
- It gives older people an opportunity to reflect on and assess their life achievements as well as disappointments.
- It combats the isolation and sense of loss that may come with growing older.
- It helps older people resolve conflicts and fears, and gives younger people a model for facing their own life challenges.
- It promotes intergenerational interaction and understanding.

Think about interviews you've seen (e.g. on television) and experienced (e.g. by a doctor). What makes a "good" interview? Here are some tips for doing an effective life interview:

An interview is just like talking with someone, but with prepared questions. You can write down the answers to the questions, or videotape or audiotape the interview. Taping the interview ensures that you don't miss anything and also allows you to review the interview at a later time.

- "Triggers" are important when you're doing a life interview. It isn't enough to say, "Tell me about your life." Triggers can be many things -- questions, photographs, keepsakes, home movies, music.
- Reading an evocative or thought-provoking story together can be an extremely effective trigger.
- During an interview, ask questions slowly, giving the person time to answer.
- You can use some "closed" questions (which prompt a respondent to give only a "yes" or "no" answer), but most should be "open" questions like: "Tell me about..."; "Describe..."; "What was it like when...?"; "In what ways...?"; "Why...?" and "How...?"
- Start with easy, friendly questions and work your way up to more difficult or sensitive questions.
- Listen carefully to what the person says; don't interrupt or correct. Maintain eye contact and show interest by leaning forward and nodding.
- As you listen to answers, other questions will come to mind. Asking follow-up questions will help you get more information.
- If someone is talking about an unhappy or painful experience, show that you understand how they feel ("That's very sad"). If the person doesn't want to talk about something, that's okay -- just go to the next question.
- It's okay for there to be moments of silence or emotion. A person's life is important, and emotion is natural. Accept emotions as part of the process.
- An interview shouldn't last more than about an hour. People do best when they're not tired. You can always do another interview. Doing several interviews actually allows you to think about answers, and come up with other questions based on the answers and things that interest you.
- Don't forget to thank the person you've interviewed. They've been generous with their time and perhaps shared personal information. Let them know you value what they've shared. Send them a thank you note and even a copy of the interview (for corrections and additions).
- Review the Optional Life Interview Questions included in the Toolkit Pack. Sample questions are grouped into topic areas. A life interview is a way to connect individuals and generations. When you're doing a life interview, it's helpful to have a set of prepared questions to guide the interview. The sample questions provided are grouped into several topic areas: life events -- childhood; life events -- adulthood; identity; the present; aging; and life lessons and legacies. Depending on the purpose of your interview,

various questions may be more or less useful. No single set of questions will elicit all the stories you might be interested in. The most useful questions will be those you develop through your own knowledge about the person. The trigger questions provided may be helpful as a start. They're meant to be suggestive, not absolute. Pick and choose among them as you feel is appropriate. And change the wording to suit your personality and the person you're interviewing. Also keep in mind that one question will lead to another and you should allow the interview to flow naturally from topic to topic as they come up.

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OPTIONAL TOOL KIT: Life Interview Questions – Childhood/ Life Events

What year were you born? On what date? What day of the week was it? Did your parents tell you anything about the day you were born?

Where were you born?

Why were you given the first (and middle) name(s) that you have?

What's your first, most vivid memory?

What was the apartment or house like that you grew up in? How many bedrooms did it have? Bathrooms?

What was your bedroom like?

Can you describe the neighborhood you grew up in?

Tell me about your parents. Where were they born? When were they born? What memories do you have of them?

Who was more strict: your mother or your father? Do you have a vivid memory of something you did that you were disciplined for?

Did your parents have a good marriage?

How did your family earn money? How did your family compare to others in the neighborhood – richer, poorer, the same?

What kinds of things did your family spend money on?

How many brothers and sisters do you have? When were they born? What memories do you have of each of them from when you were growing up?

Did you have grandparents? Where were they born? When were they born? What do you remember about them? When did they die?

Did you have any pets?

What were you like as a child? What did you like to eat? What did you do for fun? What were your favorite toys or games? Did you ever have a secret place or a favorite hiding spot?

What did you wear?

Did you get an allowance? How much? Did you spend it right away, or save it? What did you buy?

What responsibilities did you have at home when you were young?

What kind of school did you go to? Were you a good student? What was your favorite subject? Least favorite? Who were your friends? Who was your favorite teacher and why?

Did you have any heroes or role models when you were a child?

How did you spend your summer holidays? What were your favorite summer activities?

Where did your family go on vacations?

How did your family celebrate holidays (e.g. Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year, Easter, Memorial Day)? Did lots of relatives get together? What traditions did you have year after year? What food was served?

What was the best gift you remember receiving as a child?

What did you want to be when you grew up?

What big world events do you remember from the time you were growing up?

What inventions do you most remember?

What's different about growing up today from when you were growing up?

When you were a teenager, what did you do for fun? Did you have a favorite spot to "hang out"? What time did you have to be home at night? Did you ever get into any trouble?

Were there any phrases that were popular when you were a teenager? What did you like to wear? How did your parents feel about the way you talked and what you wore?

When did you learn how to drive? Who taught you? What was your first car like?

What was your graduation from high school like?

What dreams and goals did you have for your life when you graduated?

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OPTIONAL TOOL KIT: Life Interview Questions – Adulthood, Identity

Did you go to university or college? How did you decide what you wanted to study?
Did you serve in the military? What did you do and what kind of experience was it?
How did you decide what you wanted to do with your life? How do you feel about that choice?
What was your first job? What did you like or not like about it?
What job did you do most of your life? What did you like most about it? Least?
How did you meet your spouse? What did you like about him/her?
How and when did you get engaged?
When did you get married? How old were you? Where did you get married? What was your wedding like?
What was the first big purchase you made with your spouse?
What makes your spouse special or unique?
How many children do you have? When were they born? How did you decide what to name each?
What's your favorite story about each of your children?
What is something funny or embarrassing one of your children said at an early age that you'll never forget?
What's the most memorable family vacation you took?
What do you remember about holiday celebrations? Is there one holiday memory that stands out for you?
How did you feel about raising your children? What was the best part? The hardest part?
What makes you proud of your children?
How is my father/mother like me? Unlike me?
What do you remember about me when I was born? What about when I was younger than I am now?
What the best thing about being a parent? A grandparent?
Do you know the meaning of your family name? Are there stories about the origins of your family name?
Have you ever had any nicknames as a child or as an adult? Where did they come from?
How are you like your mother? Unlike her? How are you like your father? Unlike him?
What was most important to your parents?
Do you feel you're like any of your grandparents? In what ways?
How are your children like you? Unlike you?
What do you think are your three best qualities? Your three worst?
Which do you think you have the most of: talent, intelligence, education, or persistence? How has it helped you in your life?
Do you have any special sayings or expressions?
What's your favorite book and why? What's your favorite movie and why?
Who are three people in history you admire most and why?
What have been the three biggest news events during your lifetime and why?
If you could travel into the future, would you rather see something that specifically relates to you, or something that relates to the future of the country in general? Why?
If you could have three wishes, what would they be?
If you won \$1 million tomorrow, what would you do with the money?
What's the highest honor or award you've ever received?
What's the most memorable phone call you've ever received?
What's the best compliment you ever received?
What kinds of things bring you the most pleasure now? When you were a younger adult? A child?
What things frighten you now? What frightened you when you were a younger adult? A child?

What's the one thing you've always wanted but still don't have?
Do you feel differently about yourself now from how you felt when you were younger? How?
What do you think has stayed the same about you throughout life? What do you think has changed?

OPTIONAL TOOL KIT: Life Interview Questions – The Present, Aging, Life Lessons and Legacies

Do you have any hobbies or special interests? Do you enjoy any particular sports?
What's your typical day like now? How is it different from your daily routines in the past?
Is the present better or worse than when you were younger?
What do you do for fun?
Who do you trust and depend on?
What things are most important to you now? Why?
How have your dreams and goals changed through your life?
What do you see? (Hold a mirror up to the person)
What do you remember about your 20s? 30s? 40s? 50s? 60s? What events stand out in your mind? How was each age different from the one before it?
There are some ages we don't look forward to. What birthday were you least enthusiastic about? Why?
If you could go back to any age, which age would it be and why?
How do you feel now about growing old? What's the hardest thing about growing older? The best thing?
What were your parents like when they got older?
Did you have any expectations at points in your life about what growing older would be like for you?
How should a person prepare for old age? Is there anything you wish you'd done differently?
Do you think about the future and make plans? What are your concerns for the future?
If you live another 20-30 years, what will you do? Do you want to live another 20-30 years?
What do you look forward to now?
What's your most cherished family tradition? Why is it important?
What have you liked best about your life so far? What's your happiest or proudest moment?
What do you feel have been the important successes in your life? The frustrations?
What's the most difficult thing that ever happened to you? How did you deal with it?
What do you think the turning points have been in your life? What were you like then?
Are there times of your life that you remember more vividly than others? Why?
What have been the most influential experiences in your life?
Describe a person or situation from your childhood that had a profound effect on the way you look at life.
If you were writing the story of your life, how would you divide it into chapters?
What, if anything, would you have done differently in your life?
What do you know now that you wish you'd known when you were young?
What have you thrown away in your life that you wish you hadn't? What have you held on to that's important and why is it important? What "junk" have you held on to and why?
Over time, how have you changed the way you look at life/people?
What advice did your grandparents or parents give you that you remember best?
Do you have a philosophy of life? What's your best piece of advice for living? If a young person came to you asking what's the most important thing for living a good life, what would you say?
How do you define a "good life" or a "successful life"?
Do you think a person needs to first overcome serious setbacks or challenges to be truly successful?
In what way is it important to know your limitations in your life or career?

If you had the power to solve one and only one problem in the world, what would it be and why?

What do you see as your place or purpose in life? How did you come to that conclusion?

What would you like your children and grandchildren to remember about you?

If you could write a message to each of your children and grandchildren and put it in a time capsule for them to read 20 years from now, what would you write to each?

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EXAMPLES OF WINNING ESSAYS: 2008 GRAND PRIZE WINNING TEAM IS...



Duncan Boone, 11
and his grandmother
Elizabeth Barone, 60

Elizabeth Barone is a proud grandmother and real estate agent in Elkhart, IN. Duncan is in grade 6 at Elkhart's Concord East Side Elementary School. In addition to being an ambitious student, he has made the nationals for diving and enjoys playing both baseball and football. School counselor Marilyn Agee worked with the grade 6 students and teachers in the school to help classes enter the Listen to a Life Contest as part of a career unit that begins with goal-setting. She feels the contest offers students real-life examples of what can be accomplished in life and how goals are reevaluated or achieved, and brings the generations together in a meaningful way.

Congratulations!

When my grandma told me her first memory, being put in a closet for crying when she was scared her first day of kindergarten, it reminded me of Harry Potter. Both were locked in a closet, not for being bad, but for being misunderstood. There are many similarities between my grandma, Elizabeth Barone, and the character Harry Potter. She was a shy and insecure child and overcame great obstacles in her life, much like Harry.

My grandma was embarrassed to bring friends home, because she was very poor. She did not have a nice home and had an alcoholic father. Harry couldn't bring friends home either because of being different. My grandma remembers her best gift during her childhood as a new pair of shoes from the principal. Harry also had a principal watching out for him.

My grandma's role model was her grandmother. Her only vacations were with her on the lake for two weeks. Her grandmother always gave her a pack of Juicy Fruit gum. Even today when she chews Juicy Fruit gum she's reminded of those wonderful visits. Harry got his reprieve from home when he visited Ron's house where he was treated like he was special for a short time as well.

As an adult, my grandma met her Voldemort, breast cancer. She fought for her life and won. My grandma may not be a great wizard, but she is a hero to me. She overcame several obstacles in her life and worked very hard to succeed. She had to earn everything. No one looked out for her but her. She sets a goal and works until she accomplishes it. I just think that it's amazing how she was at the bottom when she was a kid, but now she is at the top.



AND THE RUNNER-UP WINNING TEAMS ARE...

Zoë Wong, 11, and grandmother
Clara Shindo Hirose, 76, Oregon

RISE ABOVE, NO EXCUSES

Imagine a family of six, cramped in a dusty, dirt-floored horse stall. The bathrooms are outside, the sun whips your back with the sweltering heat of 120 degrees F, and you have to walk to school, shoeless. For my eleven-year-old, American-born, Nisei grandmother Clara, she wasn't imagining – she was living this reality.

In 1942, Clara's family was relocated during World War II to an internment camp in Arizona in accordance with Executive Order 9066. Her family had one week to sell their belongings, all because their race, Japanese American, labeled them as "bad guys."

The winters were cold; the desert summers hot. People stared at them through the barbed wire fence that surrounded their camp. A bell rang for meals, and everyone scrambled for food, mess-hall style. Life was uncertain. Her parents worried as her brother was drafted out of the camp to serve in the US Army. This was her life for three years.

When the war ended, her family, penniless, moved to Denver and restarted their life from scratch. Clara learned from her "camp years" that you have to "rise above adversity, no excuses. If something is challenging, don't complain. Just put your head down and work hard."

Just like her words, she strove to succeed. She graduated from high school as Valedictorian. She worked hard to win a scholarship, the only way she could

afford to attend the University of Denver. She majored in education and art, and after graduation taught first-graders, married, and had a family.

My grandmother is an amazing person. Although she says her "camp years" have changed her perspective on the world and her life, she remains a positive person. Whenever I am faced with challenges, I remember her legacy, and always work as hard as I can.



Justine Rusk, 16, and grandmother
Halina Ruszkowski, 85, New York

THE LAST DIAMOND

"Three," she repeated to herself. Her blue eyes were still blue at this point, as told by the glare of the diamonds. She boarded the train, a third of her life behind her waving, another in her only suitcase, and the last third in her hand, fresh wedding rings touching.

They didn't care where the train led as long as it was somewhere far from Hitler's fingers, even if that meant far from Poland.

They settled nicely in France and lived comfortably for almost two years – nicely, if you define nice as a foreign country with familiar fear; comfortably if it is leaving one thousand acres and a chauffeur-driven life for a cramped apartment. They barely made it, and wouldn't have if not for the first diamond.

1946: America. Hitler's arm was extending further and she made the final decision which landed them in Buffalo, New York. The second diamond left her grip for a check to last them their first years in America.

She had her first child in 1951, second in 1953, and third and final boy in 1955. She loved them deeply, but no girls. No one to brag to about winning Miss Teenage Europe; no one to wrap the last diamond around the neck of; and no one to tell, "Live on the history." Another generation of boys came along with her boys as fathers. But on July 18, 1991, when a baby girl was born with the bluest eyes, she cried. Her wait was over.

I'm on this earth to tell her how beautiful she is when her face falls while viewing recent pictures of herself. I'm here to receive the last diamond on July 18, 2013. I'm here, her only granddaughter, to write my grandmother's story – to carry on the history.



Samantha Schoepflin, 12, and grandmother
Doris Schoepflin, 83, New York

A REFLECTION

"Oh dear lord, put that mirror down!" she yells.

"Grandma, I have to ask you this question! What do you think of yourself when you look in a mirror?" I am now fighting to pull the mirror out of her clutch.

"All I see is an ugly old woman. Now Samantha, put that mirror down!" she commands sternly.

This magnificent, eighty-three-year-old woman I proudly call my grandmother has experienced many troubles and hardships in her lifetime. Doris Schoepflin was born into a family of difficulty. When she was two years old, her father died of pneumonia, leaving her mother a widow with four girls.

While all of her friends were dropping out of school during the Great Depression, she remained in school to finish her education. She fell in love with a man named Richard. They got married in 1948 and later had three adorable sons. But things took a turn for the worst when Richard had his first stroke. Sadly, Richard passed away in 1999.

Around Christmastime in 2007, Doris was diagnosed with lung cancer. While she was recovering from surgery she stayed with my family. Throughout those four weeks, I realized how strong of a woman she is. She's always thinking about someone else before herself. One striking feature about her is the astonishing ability to live with all her regrets and dilemmas. She is a wonderful role model, mother, and grandmother.

When she looks into a mirror, she sees an old woman that "doesn't look good" without her wig and counts every wrinkle as another sign of aging. But when I see her reflection in the mirror, I see a very remarkable woman who leaves an unforgettable reflection on my life.



Rebecca Curran, 14, and grandfather
Cornelius Curran, 73, New Jersey

The dim roar of train engines can be heard over the laughter echoing through the break room. As the trains whistle in and out of the station, five ambitious workers sit laughing as they organize the day's profits. One conductor laments about how many pennies they collect. "Look at all these pennies! Imagine what we could

buy if we collected all of them!" he exclaims. Amid the discussion and speculation about the money, Railmen for Children was born.

My grandfather, Cornelius Francis Curran, was one of those five founders of Railmen for Children. When he and his fellow conductors collected train fares, they put all the pennies in a jar and replaced them with their own money. When this jar was filled, they deposited the money and bought gifts for disabled children. In 1983, they bought a Christmas tree for the train and invited several schools for disabled children on a free train ride. On the ride, one of the men dressed as Santa Claus and distributed gifts to the children. As their organization grew, the railroad company built a wishing well in the Hoboken terminal as another source of income for the nonprofit organization.

My grandfather has inspired me to reach out to others and appreciate the gifts I've been given. Listening to his story opened my eyes to how much something as simple as a train ride can mean to someone. He showed me that just a few people can make a difference in the world. Thanks to my grandfather and his coworkers, over three hundred special needs children receive a spectacular train ride at Christmastime. When asked, my grandfather claimed he "wanted to grow up to be an adult," but I don't think he realized what an amazing adult he would grow up to be!



Latrice Coleman, 16, and grandmother
Catherine Coleman, 84, Arizona

"We ain't where we ought to be, we ain't where we should be, but thank God we ain't where we was."

This sage bit of her grandmother's wisdom still rings in the ears of Catherine Coleman as she remembers growing up in Statesville, NC. She wondered then and wonders now if things are ever going to really change.

Born in 1924, my grandmother lived through the time of colored water fountains, segregation, and racism, as well as changes in the American idea of community. Growing up, Catherine lived in a close-knit community where neighbors looked out for one another. Everyday she and her friends from the neighborhood walked to the colored school, crossing paths with their white counterparts. Many times, this simple event could lead to a fight.

Catherine would graduate from high school and relocate to New York City for nursing school. In a year she completed her nurse's training, began her career, married, and moved into her first home. It was the outbreak of the Vietnam War that caused her to look around once more and think about racial inequality. "My

father fought in World War I, my husband and brother were fighting in this war, but it doesn't mean a thing." They were treated better by the enemy than the Americans they served.

Today Mrs. Coleman has a new view as she watches Barack Obama campaigning for the presidency, a sight she never thought she would see in her lifetime. She tells everyone, "I may be eighty-four, but I tell you I would stand outside and campaign for him today if he needed me." Now, when she thinks about her grandmother's long-ago wisdom, she is glad she believed, and knows her grandmother looks down from heaven, realizing just maybe we are where we ought to be.



Elizabeth Han, 12, and grandfather
Duk Han, 85, Ohio

DETERMINATION

Who would ever think that a person would be sent to jail because of a cross? We Americans are very fortunate to be living in such a free nation. Sometimes people take our freedoms for granted. I learned from my grandpa that nothing can destroy determination.

My grandpa told me the stories of when his life was at its toughest. We never had much conversation before. There is a large language barrier between us. But his stories really fascinated me. Life in South Korea was even harder than I had ever imagined.

My grandpa was born on March 13, 1922. His birth was during the Japanese invasion. Koreans were forced to bow down to the Japanese leader. Anybody who refused was severely punished. Many churches were burned down when Christians were gathered. Many people, like my grandpa's family, were suffering.

My grandpa was and still is a very religious man. He stood up for his Christianity. When he was nineteen years old, he made and wore a metal cross. My grandpa never bowed down to the Japanese emperor. This bold action of rebellion got him arrested and sent to jail. He was released three months later.

The Japanese invasion was right before a world war. After everything settled down, my grandpa was determined to follow his dreams. He built his own organ and piano factory. His life was "normal" for a while, but then the Korean War broke out. My grandpa's factory, along with his hard work, was destroyed. When the war was over and everything settled down again, he was determined to rebuild everything and kept going.

My grandpa's life has been a well-fought battle. No matter what happened, he was always determined and kept fighting.



Mark Fox, 17, and grandfather
A. Tony Cote, 73, Saskatchewan

Tony Cote was born on February 21, 1935, on the Cote First Nation in Saskatchewan, Canada. His parents were Frank and Ellen Cote and his great-grandfather was Chief Gabriel Cote who was the main spokesperson for all the Saulteaux tribes at the signing of Treaty 4 on September 15, 1884.

Tony's family lived in poverty. His father was unable to work because of an operation he had on his stomach that never healed properly. Tony and his mother picked all kinds of berries in the woods and sold them for thirty-five cents a can.

Tony Cote is a survivor of the residential school era, which was the most terrible experience of his life. The school he attended was Saint Phillips and was located on the Keeseekoose reservation. The school was very strict and made students forget their native language and ways. If they were caught practicing their beliefs, or speaking their language, they were beaten.

He attended class all morning and for the rest of the day was put to work in the fields doing all kinds of farming. He went to school ten months out of the year and was never allowed to have any contact with his family.

Today Tony is a traditional Indian man. He speaks his language and is still spiritual. In 1972 he constructed the first artificial ice rink on a reserve in Saskatchewan. He also founded the Saskatchewan Indian Winter and Summer games in 1974. Many native children from all over Saskatchewan compete in many sports events representing their tribal councils.

Tony is currently employed at The First Nations University of Canada as a Commissionaire-Security. His greatest accomplishment in his life was his role as Chief of Cote, and achieving his dream of bringing sports and recreation to native youth all over Saskatchewan.



Aramie Nydam, 9, and grandfather
Charles Booher, 88, Oregon

GRANDPA, A MAN OF STRONG BELIEFS

He is my mom's dad, born in Oregon in 1920, near a small town called Leona. The houses he lived in had no electricity or running water. Grandpa moved seven times while growing up; his father was a logger. He was the oldest of three boys. They walked two-and-a-half miles to school. His family went to town once a month to buy supplies. They had a cow and a small garden.

Grandpa was the only one in his family to finish high school. I asked grandpa if he had dreams when he was young. "To catch the big one!" he said. He loves to fish. Grandpa said in those days a man's goal was to have a family and provide what they needed. And in 1941 he was married to Dorothy Holt, from South Dakota.

Grandpa worked at Safeway for twenty-five dollars a week, ran a grocery store, served in the military for two years, and ran a commercial fishing boat. In 1953 they moved to a farm. In all that time, six kids were born. The youngest was my mom.

About that time schools began teaching theory as fact, and other things my grandpa did not agree with. So my grandparents taught the older kids high school at home. After my mom finished third grade, they kept her home. My grandparents did what the law required. They tested my mom and started a private school. They had to go to court, but they won with a trial by jury. My mom was in the newspapers and on television.

My grandpa was the first person to make home-schooling legal. I am glad he did, because now my parents are my teachers, and I can go to school at home.



Yanisbel Ordaz, 17, and grandfriend
Jose Garcia, 64, Florida

Struggles... they happen. Some people overcome their struggles, and some don't deal with them. Coming to this country without money, family, or even a home is a struggle itself. Jose Garcia, a Cuban refugee, arrived on March 25, 1960, at the age of 16.

Jose and some of his friends took it upon themselves to come to the United States in order to help their families prosper in Cuba. Having come from Cuba illegally, Jose struggled to find a job and maintain a roof over his head. Living in Miami was going badly for him, so he decided to seek a better living. He moved to Brooklyn, New York to improve his situation and work in construction. But things didn't work out as he planned.

Jose became involved with illegal drugs, both consuming and selling them. Since selling drugs was easier than actually working in construction, Jose stopped

working with the construction company. He was "living the dream life of every Cuban refugee. Getting money, girls and having everything he ever wanted," Jose says. "Everything was wonderful. This was the American dream."

Being too ashamed to let his family in Cuba know about his situation, he told them that he was still working a twelve-hour shift at the construction company.

One day his "American dream life" came to an end. The police came knocking at his door. Jose was arrested and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Feeling like a failure to his family, Jose decided to clean up his act. He was willing to help the Brooklyn Police. He became an informant. His information was so useful that his sentence was reduced to eight-and-a-half years.

Now Jose is doing well. His advice: "Stay away from drugs and don't do anything you'll regret later."



Guadalupe Chavez, 18, and grandfather
Rodolfo Chavez, 68, New Jersey

According to Charles Darwin, it is neither the strongest of species that survive nor the most intelligent, but rather those most responsive to change. Evidence of this can be found in any story, if one only takes the time to listen.

I've always been familiar with my grandfather, my dad's papa. I love my Abuelito Rodolfo with all my heart, but language and distance have always been barriers in our relationship. Even during the precious two weeks every year when I am lucky enough to visit him in Mexico, I never really took the time to listen to the stories that emerge when he gives in to the liquor bottle. He's always been a hard worker, my abuelito, but that was the extent of my knowledge.

The phone call I had to make for the interview was, at first, an awkward one; I was shy and he didn't know how to talk to me. However, once we relaxed, the fact that my Spanish is far from perfect hardly mattered. We both got lost in the tales of childhood. His mother was single all her life and died when he was only two years old. His biological father never wanted him, so he was taken in by one of his mother's cousins and had to work hard to survive ever since. My grandfather was always independent. Slowly, he saved the money he earned by helping construction workers as a young boy. Each time he looked for work, he would go farther and farther from his home in the small village of Huehuetlaxtla. Eventually, he became financially stable after working in California in the 1960s as a field worker at a farm. He was able to start a family.

Without all of his perseverance, I would not be typing these words.



Brandon Moore, 8, and grandfather
Warren Bleasé, III, 73, California

I'm going to tell you the story of "Rags," my papa, Warren Robert Bleasé, III. For five years I've lived next door to him, but never took the time to get to know him as well as I did over a weekend, two weeks ago. He taught me about life, my heritage, and himself.

During the interview, we discussed many things like the death of his brother and beloved wife, the depression years, and how hard his mother worked to provide for her family. But the thread that tied it all together was his undying love of sports, specifically baseball and billiards.

During his youth and early adult life, Rags wanted to be a professional baseball player. When he was thirteen, he was introduced to billiards by his Cubmaster. He liked it so much he used to climb out of his bedroom window at night to go play pool, illegally. I guess you could say he was a bit of a rebel. Papa also had a love for clothing and would dress nicely at the pool hall, earning him his nickname, "Rags."

While serving in the military, he still found opportunities to play baseball and billiards. His dream to one day play professionally remained alive.

At the age of thirty-two he met his future wife, Marcelle. His life focus began to change. Although he disliked it, he worked hard and persevered as a banker to support his new family.

The advice he gives me now is: persevere! Today, Rags is retired, enjoys his grandchildren and spends time teaching billiards. I guess you could say his life, to an extent, has come full circle. Listening to his life story has solidified in me how wonderful it is to have dreams, but how important it is to have attainable dreams.



Emma Saisslin, 11, and grandmother
Marsha Moore, 61, Oregon

ALMOST PERFECT

Perfection. So many of us try to be perfect. But can anyone be perfect, and can life be trouble-free?

My Momo (grandma) once thought so. She was happily married with five children. But with her sixth child, Momo's vision of a perfect life changed.

In 1983, Michael was born. At first, Momo thought he was an ordinary child. But doctors soon realized Michael suffered severe brain damage at birth. Mike needed extra care, and the doctors recommended placing him in an institution for people with mental retardation. But Momo believed he'd have a better life at home with his family.

Momo hoped and dreamed Mike would lead as normal a life as possible. For the first eight years of his life, Mike went to a regular school, had friends, and learned sign language to communicate. Meanwhile, Momo went back to school and earned a master's degree in Special Education.

However, when Michael was nine, his condition worsened. Mike began having severe seizures. It was difficult to care for Mike, but with the help of family and her faith in God, Momo persevered. She realized Mike had taught her a valuable life lesson: We are human and being human isn't about being perfect. Momo told me, "God made us all to be wonderful in different ways. We must accept people for who they are and show them love and compassion all the same."

Momo helped me understand that few people go through life without facing sorrow. But, if we can grow and accept life's challenges, it helps make us stronger. Though life will never be perfect, when we are kind to others and show them gentleness and compassion, it might just make the world almost perfect.



Logan Gerken, 18, and grandmother
Nancy Crew, 67, Ohio

BROKEN WINDOW

Take a look at a stained glass window. It is shiny and can have many shapes, but it also can have its little imperfections of scratches and smears. All the little shapes inside that window are your dreams. Now take a rock and throw it directly at the window and see what happens. It shatters.

Imagine yourself as a window. Everyone has their flaws. But what if all the little glass pieces were broken? What if someone walked into your life and threw a huge rock at you and your life changed and all your dreams were broken?

My grandmother was a broken window. Her dreams of having a great and happy family were broken when she was faced with divorce. She had to go from raising three girls on two salaries to raising three girls on one salary.

"I had to learn to swallow my pride and move on," my grandmother told me.

She had to take those pieces of glass and create a new window of dreams. One of those dreams was to create her own cookbook. She achieved that dream a few years ago. It wasn't easy – a lot of time and many revisions went into the book. But, with hard work and dedication, she accomplished her goal.

If there is one thing I have learned from talking to my grandmother, it's that no matter what rock is thrown at me, I must pick up the pieces and try again at something new. I must never let myself sulk in disappointment. I hope that one day I can be like her. If my dreams fail, I hope I have enough courage to think of a new one and finish a window.



Timothy Nooney, 14, and grandfather
William Nooney, 82, New Jersey

As he sits in his chair watching television, the involuntary shaking of his body has become natural to him. His face is hard and cannot show many emotions, but his eyes express them for him. My grandfather is a man of few words, but many actions. He is a strong man. He has a disease called Parkinson's, which slowly deteriorates the motor system of the body. When he first received the news, he fell silent. He looked as if he were in deep thought. That night he came home with a pamphlet and a prescription form.

When my grandfather was younger, he decided to join the Merchant Marines. It is a section of the navy that delivers soldiers to war zones. He is now 82 years old and he continues to live a normal life. He is reaching the worst part of the disease, but he is taking it on like the soldier he was. He had played on the seniors bowling team for years even with the shaking. He excelled in it. He said once that he would not let this "minor inconvenience" dictate how he would live his life.

My grandfather gave me one of my greatest lessons without even speaking. He taught me to always look in myself for strength and to never let some "minor inconvenience" govern my life. As he sits at the dinner table his body shaking so much that sometimes he cannot use the fork to pick up his food, he still perseveres. He makes it through dinner like a champion and then slowly walks back to his chair. My grandfather has never allowed himself to crumble at the feet of this disease and that is the greatest legacy he could leave.



Katharine Vavilov, 11, and great-grandmother
Roza Poleeva, 102, Pennsylvania

THE BEAUTY OF ROZA

Great ones do not need immortality to believe – believe in the chance you have in a lifetime. You do not need to be immortal to be a great helping person. Take a chance to listen to others. Take a life and turn it into history. I did that with my great-grandmother, Roza Poleeva.

Roza is a believer. She doesn't need immortality. When she was growing up with her sister Lebuf in Kirsanov, Russia, she believed in making her dreams come true. "Mmmmmm, I feel like I'm back there right now, smelling the sweet aroma of delicious bread," she said during the interview.

She was great in academics, loved to paint, and dreamed of becoming a surgeon. Her dream came true.

During that part of her life, Russian Jews were immigrating to America. But her family couldn't because they stopped the immigration in Russia.

She met the love of her life when she was 19. That man, my great-grandfather, Ura Stepansky, made her life so much more. He was a famous scientist. Later, during World War II, he fought for Moscow while Roza helped hurt soldiers. Later in her life, she had a child – my grandpa Leonard Stepansky. He was her baby, an experience in her life like no other.

When our teacher Mrs. Johnson read us the book *Dream* by Susan V. Bosak, it taught me the true meaning of dreaming. Dreams are goals to strive toward based on your beliefs. When I interviewed my great-grandmother Roza, she told me how her dreams came true. As she always says, "You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream." Dream a dream with me.



Joshua Lenertz, 16, and grandfriend
Alice Canida Folden, 88, Virginia

A FUTURE RESERVED

As the hot air fills my lungs, my eyes burn, and my thoughts wander. Swallowing hard, I shut my eyes and remember my rough times: the anxiety of a husband away at war, the languishing death of friends, and the difficulty of this addiction. Again the hot air fills my lungs, and now my eyes fill with tears.

My name is Alice Canida Folden and, after 65 years of smoking, I quit. Cold turkey.

Alice, who has endured her share of tough times, described quitting smoking as one of her greatest personal challenges. Smoking has punctuated her enjoyment of life – dinner became a bridge between smokes, a jazz ballad only an interval between nicotine fixes. Once living with smoking was second nature and Alice aged, the prospect of quitting seemed to vanish. Only something drastic would bring change. After a serious health issue, Alice defeated one of her greatest challenges at the age of 82.

When I interviewed Alice, I was awestruck by her stories and humbled by her past. And as I spoke to her at the home, other residents added to her stories. I soon realized that so many people had learned so many lessons. Advice was given simply... "Don't drink," "You can make life anything." More affecting were words like "War is hell" and "Can you do it?" Each person had their own "smoking story." They gave me advice so that I may never have a "smoking story." The stories taught me to reserve my right for the future.

Alice Folden showed me how determination can conquer seemingly impossible circumstances. Her story, and her generation's stories, gave me valuable perspective. Due to their advice and sacrifices, I will make sure my future is reserved for my good decisions.



Nathan Smith, 12, and grandmother
Valerie Elizabeth Buk Smith, 78, Ohio

GRANNY SMITH

Granny Smith was picked from her Medina County orchard on August 30, 1929.

As a seedling, she was mostly a sweet apple, but like all people, she had her sour moments. High school was her ripest time. There was another sweet apple named Bernie "Red" Smith. Granny always dreamed of having a family, and she was the apple of Red's eye. Granny Smith's core felt like it would be cut out if she couldn't have Red. They married.

After high school, Granny Smith's life turned lumpy, like applesauce. She didn't have enough "green" to become an office worker, her dream career, so she worked at Krispy Kreme packaging chocolate doughnuts and, her favorite, apple fritters. Then, the crisper part of her life came.

Things started to grow better in the orchard, and she moved to office work. She often brought a green apple to work to give her a fresh start to each morning.

Granny Smith achieved both of her goals: she raised her family as she worked her office job. During her office career, she had seven little apple pies in her

oven. They grew up in the same orchard that Granny Smith grew up in. Six of her seven children moved on to new orchards. She is happily living with her perfect apple, Red.



Kelsey Bridges, 18, and grandmother
Mary Gross Shelley, 75, Ohio

M.B.I.

Growing up in 1950s America, Mary Asel, a woman who wanted to be an F.B.I. agent, was a rarity. As a child, she was introduced to the mysterious characters and suave appearances of government agents. Their job was intriguing and she thought it would be a way for her to better the world in the slightest way. Her career pursuits changed, however, after she became Mary Gross and brought six children into the world.

"I became an M.B.I. – a Mother of Bureau Investigations," Mary Gross Shelley says.

She does not regret her decision to become a mother, and she loves her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren with her entire heart. As she grew and matured, her goals and dreams changed. She didn't want to live the life of an F.B.I. agent, but rather wanted to live the life of a mother. Not simply a mother, but a teacher, an inspiration, and a comforter to her children, so that they might continue in her footsteps on a quest to make the world a more peaceful place.

Some may look at housewives as weak and ambitionless. But they are not. They want to contribute to the world in a different way than the businesswoman, the doctor, or the athlete. They want to help people in their own way. By using her abilities to nurture and mold the people of the future, Mary Gross Shelley hopes to make the future better than the present. She has fulfilled her dreams by having six children who each contribute to the world in their own unique way. Her goal was that her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren would do well in life. With her guidance, they are well on their way to a better tomorrow.



Saira Jafferjee, 14, and grandfriend
Christine Farran, 50, Florida

"Saira, in life, you will always need three things: a funny bone, a wish bone, and a backbone," said my neighbor Mrs. Farran before I even started asking her any interview questions. I thought about this quote for a very long time, and came to the conclusion that this little quote sums up her life pretty well.

Mrs. Farran lived in Israel for most of her life. Of course, everyone knew Christine Farran. She was the talk of the town. This tiny little girl seemed to entertain and fascinate everyone she came in contact with. She was witty, always making people laugh through her pranks on neighbors, or her tiny schemes against someone in her never-ending number of family members. Mrs. Farran definitely has a funny bone.

Mrs. Farran was also a dreamer. She dreamt of moving to America and becoming successful, and having a huge family. It all seemed it was coming true when she met her soon-to-be husband, Emile. One thing led to another, they ended up getting married, and still are to this day. Lucky for her, Mr. Farran had the same dream as his new wife. Together they made their dream come true. Her wish bone didn't stop wishing there, though.

However, things can never be that simple. Everything in America seemed to be so different to them. They didn't speak fluent English, and had no idea where they were going when they explored this new, foreign place called Florida. Mrs. Farran was turned down for many jobs. The couple was barely able to make enough income on a month-to-month basis. Mrs. Farran definitely developed a backbone.

I admire Mrs. Farran. Sure, her life may seem pretty common. But, as she says, "I am 50 years young, and can't wait to grow more bones."



Hillary Burdette-Sapp, 16, and grandmother
Patsy Burdette, 73, Georgia

When my grandmother, Pitty-Pat, was nine, she and her sister got into trouble and learned a profound truth all from the same Tide detergent contest.

My grandmother grew up on a small farm in West Tennessee with her family and her mother Mimi. The family was so poor they even made their own bathing suits. Although Mimi lacked book-learning, she was wise about life.

While Pitty-Pat and her family were poor, local tenant farmers were even poorer. One day, after visiting the neighbor's tenant farmer, Pitty-Pat and her sister burst into their kitchen at home snickering together. Mimi asked why they were laughing and they retold what the tenant farmer had just told them. They had been sitting in the neighbor's kitchen when the tenant farmer burst in, excited to report on her plan for winning a huge amount of money. She told them that she had heard on the radio about a contest where Tide would give \$500 to the person who best completed the sentence: "I use Tide because..." The woman had come up with what she knew would be the winning slogan.

The girls could not believe the woman's gullibility; to think that she, an uneducated tenant farmer, could win a national contest. The girls laughed as they retold the story to Mimi.

Mimi spun around from the stove and looked at them hard before she spoke, her voice trembling: "You never laugh at someone's dreams. Everyone deserves the right to dream without being ridiculed. Never laugh at someone's dreams." The girls stood there frozen, speechless, and ashamed of their callous actions.

The simple wisdom of Mimi's words still echoes in my grandmother's life after all of these years. Sometimes all we have to hold on to is our dreams, our hopes for tomorrow.
